



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 20: 11-18

Summer 2023

"A New Relationship"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. Our passage this morning is John 20, verses eleven through eighteen, (we just sang our passage, so I'll read it here in a moment).

But just to refresh your memory, Mary, (and the women not mentioned in John but in the other Gospels), have been to the tomb—and found that it was empty. They were troubled by that. Mary was very distraught; and she went and informed Peter and John that ‘the tomb was empty’, thinking someone had stolen the body. They came to the tomb, they looked in it; and seeing the graveclothes John *understood* what had happened—that Christ was raised!

Mary had followed behind, and so we read, beginning with verse 11,

<sup>11</sup> But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. <sup>13</sup> And they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.” <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing *there*, and did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said

to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and *that* He had said these things to her.

John 20: 11-18

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word, and bless our time of study in it together. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

Father, what a privilege it is to be with Your people on this Sunday morning. You've instructed us to do that; to 'not forsake the gathering together of the saints, as is the practice of some.' The author of Hebrews (10:25), recognized a problem that is sometimes common in churches, that we can begin to drift a bit in our devotion to You; we thank You that You brought us here this morning. And we know this is where we should be, this is where we're nourished spiritually and built up in the faith. And so I pray, LORD, that that will be the result of our time together; and that occurs through the reading, and the study, and the teaching of Your Word. It's Your revelation—and You feed our soul on it.

Help us to be nourished through our time of study this morning. May the Spirit of God minister to us, give us insight, understanding of what we've read, and what we will consider at some length, and may He apply it to us as is appropriate. These things apply to us in different ways because we're different people and we have different issues that we are dealing with at various times—and so we are so thankful that this ministry is not left to an individual, a human voice, but the Spirit of God is in it, (and that's what makes it supernatural). So this is a supernatural hour we're participating in, LORD, and we pray that You'd bless us in it, and make this a rich time of study and worship.

So we pray you'd bless us in this hour—and we pray for those who are not here and those who are in other places, family members and friends. We pray that You would

bless those that are in difficulty. You use the trials of life to bless us and conform us to the image of Christ; and that's not an easy experience, but You use that, and use all things in our life for that.

And again, principally You use Your Word. And we pray that You would bless us with an understanding of it and cause us to grow in our love for Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and grow in our love for our Triune God. We thank You for Your love for us that has saved us and brought us here. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) In John 17:3, Jesus gave a definition of eternal life: It's not only endless existence, (it's not mainly that), it is *knowing* God. It is a *relationship* with the Triune God, a personal relationship with Christ.

And that implies that He is alive, which brings us to our passage which is about *the resurrection* —which we've been singing about this morning. '*The resurrection*', an idea summarily dismissed as false in our naturalistic age of science and reason: 'It's a legend', 'It's a folk tale.'

Now if that were true, that the resurrection was just a fable, that it had not occurred, would that make any difference to your life? J. I. Packer put the question this way: 'Suppose that, like Socrates or Confucius, Christ was now no more than a beautiful memory; 'Would it matter?' We should still have His example and teaching—wouldn't they be enough?'

There are many in churches this morning who would answer, "Yes! That's quite enough." An article in *Newsweek* magazine about 30 years ago titled, "Rethinking the Resurrection" stated that 30 percent of people who call themselves 'born again' don't believe that Jesus came back to physical life after He was crucified. So for many Americans, '*The beautiful memory*' is the important thing; they don't need the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. A secular, materialistic, rationalistic religion is fine with them.

But Paul told the Corinthians that it matters: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins...and we are of all men most to be pitied." (1Cor 15:17-19). Or, as Dr. Packer put it, "A Christ who remained in the grave can still be your hero, but He cannot be your Savior."

The reason for that is given in Romans chapter 4, verse 25, where Paul concisely explained the cross and the empty tomb: "He", (Christ), "was *delivered over* because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification." In other words, 'The cross happened because of our sins.' The only way to remove the penalty of God's justice against us, due to our sin, was by the Son of God suffering the penalty for it in our place.

And you can think of it this way: We owe God, as His creatures, righteousness. Sin takes away righteousness; it puts us in debt to God. It is a debt too great for us to pay; for that requires perfection—and we cannot give that. Christ came to take on our debt and cancel it by dying for our sins, and making us whole with God—'right' with God, '*justified*.'

So, "He was *delivered over* because of our transgressions" to remove them and save us from their penalty. He, "was *raised* because of our justification", meaning, 'Raised because He obtained justification for us at the cross.'

The resurrection, then, is the proof that Christ's sacrifice was accepted by God—that it satisfied God's justice and that we are now, in fact, *justified, forgiven*; accepted by Him as innocent. And not just innocent, but *righteous*—righteous in His sight.

Now, 'The resurrection' did not save us. Nowhere does the New Testament state, 'Christ was raised for our sins.' The cross saved us; that's where sin was punished. That's where our debt was paid; and atonement made. The resurrection is God's announcement of victory. It is His endorsement of His Son's work on the cross—the sign that He accepted His sacrifice for us. So if there was no resurrection, there was no endorsement, no victory—and we "are still in our sins", as Paul said, (1Cor 15:17), and there is no eternal life and no relationship with God—we're doomed.

But that's not so. The testimony of the apostles and early church is that the tomb was empty, so that first Easter morning was the event that showed that Christ was raised. Christ rose, and that's the witness of Scripture, and it's well supported. Paul stated at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15, (verses 5&6), that Christ not only "appeared" to the apostles, but on one occasion, "He appeared to more than 500 brethren" at the same time.

There have been attempts to discredit all of that. The resurrection has been dismissed as, 'The result of rumors spread by Mary Magdalene, who had suffered an hallucination.' A second century philosopher named Celsus, in a critique on Christianity, dismissed the account of the resurrection as based on, "the hallucination of an hysterical woman." Others would later use the same argument. But the fact that he was trying to disprove the resurrection in the second century is proof, from a very early date, that the church believed in it from the beginning.

And they believed in it with good reason. Even if Mary's testimony is dismissed, what about John's? He believed in the resurrection before she did. When he and Peter came to the tomb they found it empty—and they *saw* the graveclothes. And what about the more than 500 people who *saw* the resurrected Christ at one time? Was that a mass hallucination? Not likely.

And, the earliest attempt to discredit the resurrection, (as being a hoax perpetrated by the disciples), was the Pharisees' claim that 'They stole the body', (Mat 28:13). This is also without foundation; for the disciples hadn't even had time to comprehend the Lord's statement about the resurrection, (which He had given on numerous occasions). They were not expecting it. They had gone into hiding the night of His arrest—not to plot a resurrection, but to hide themselves from the authorities.

Even if they had stolen the body, would they have devoted their lives to perpetuating a lie, even to the point of dying martyr's deaths for a hoax? It's not likely. As John Stott wrote, "Hypocrites and martyrs are not made of the same stuff."

There's only one reasonable, credible, explanation for the empty tomb, for the birth of the church; and for the rapid spread of Christianity within that first generation of the church—and that is the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

All of this is to say, 'The Scriptures are clear and the supporting evidence is strong that the resurrection of Christ is an historical fact'; an inconvenient fact for a secular world, but one that we can believe. In fact Princeton theologian, Benjamin B. Warfield wrote, "No fact in the history of the world is so well authenticated as the fact of Christ's resurrection."

It affirms that we have a living Savior; that every believer in Jesus Christ has eternal life; and that means that we have a *personal relationship* with the Lord God. And we learn about that *relationship* from our passage and the conversation Jesus had with Mary Magdalene. The way He dealt with her reveals a lot about His character and how He deals with us.

Our text begins with Mary at the tomb, weeping. She has returned, maybe drawn back by her grief. Maybe she hoped someone might be there to help her locate the Lord's body. She stood there, grieving for a while, then stooped and looked inside the tomb. And there she saw two angels who asked her why she was weeping.—The idea being, 'There's no reason for it; this was not a time of sorrow, it was a time for joy!' She was looking into an empty tomb—evidence of the greatest miracle of history!...and she was sad. It must have astonished the angels.

It all had happened just as Jesus told the disciples it would: 'He would rise on the third day.' —And there was the proof of it; and she was weeping. In fact, her grief was so great that she even didn't realize she was talking to angels. But this was the condition of all the Lord's followers at this time: Despair, because they had not understood and believed His promise. So the angels asked her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And she answered, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." (vs13).

But before the angels could tell her the 'Good News', (that His body was gone because He had risen), Mary turned to look behind her. Maybe she heard movement, or maybe, as John Chrysostom, the fourth century preacher suggested, "The angels saw the Lord and they made a gesture, perhaps bowing, that caused her to turn." Whatever the reason, when she turned she saw Jesus—but she didn't recognize Him, (seeing Him was the last thing she expected).

Sometimes when you see someone you know, in a different place where you're not used to seeing him, you don't recognize him immediately. That may have been the case here, but also His appearance may have been different. This is the *resurrected* Christ. You'll remember that the two disciples on the Emmaus road in Luke 24, (vs31), didn't recognize Him either, and they spoke with Him at length before, "their eyes were opened", as Luke put it.

And here, Jesus began a conversation with Mary; He asked her the question the angels had asked, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" (vs15). That question, "Whom are you seeking?" was more probing than Mary may have realized. He asked "Whom", not 'What'. She was looking for 'a what'—for a lifeless corpse, not a 'Who'; not a person. She should have been seeking the living, not the dead.

And it's a question for today as well, because as long as people seek the corpse of Christ, they will never find Him. As long as they honor a dead hero, they will never *know* the living Savior. He is alive, not dead. And Mary would soon learn that; but at that moment, she "supposed" that Jesus was someone else, that He was "the gardener." (vs15).

The irony is, she was closer to the truth than she knew: "He is our gardener, who tends the garden of His church...", someone has said, "...who sows the seeds of grace and waters them." That's what Paul stated in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, in verse 9, 'We plant seeds, but He is the one who gives the growth, gives us life, and causes us to bear fruit.' He was the Master Gardener who was with Adam, in Eden, in that first garden, who walked with him there in the cool of the day when they worshiped together, and

had fellowship together. And now, He's there in this garden; He spoke to Mary in the Jerusalem garden before the empty tomb.

But thinking that He was just a servant, she jumped to the conclusion that He might have been the one that removed the body. And so she asked, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." (vs15c).

She then turned back again to look at the empty tomb—and that was when the Lord 'opened her eyes'. He did it with one word, her name; He said, "Mary!" That's all—but that was enough. She knew Him immediately—not by sight, but by Word. Just like the good shepherd who knows his sheep and calls them all by name, He called her—and she knew His voice because she was one of His sheep.

He could have used another word, like *peace*, (in fact, that's the word that He will speak, to His disciples, in just a few verses, in verse 19). But He said to her, her name—to remind her of His unique, personal relationship with her. And she instantly responded. Amazed, she turned back to look at Him, and, "...said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher)." (vs16).

Then in her joy, she grabbed hold of Him. It was a natural response, but one that the Lord gently corrected. He said, in verse 17, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." Now that might be a little bit of a puzzling statement on His part: What did He mean by that?

Well obviously He didn't mean that her grasp prevented His ascension. Death couldn't hold Him in the tomb; Mary's grasp couldn't have kept Him earthbound. And the Lord didn't mean that her touch defiled His resurrection body and would affect His return to heaven, (because in verse 27 He commands Thomas to touch Him, put his hand in the nail prints in His hand and His side).

Well Thomas was instructed to do that because he didn't believe in the resurrection. Mary's touch was one of faith and devotion, so it would seem to have been 'good'—not defiling. Nor was He speaking of an immediate ascension, from which He would then return, and then be on the earth for the 40 days, and then ascend, finally,



from the Mount of Olives. If something as significant as that had happened, it certainly would have been recorded. But there's no mention of it.

What most likely the Lord was indicating in this gentle, kind rebuke that He gives is: 'He was not returning to His former relationship with them. Things were not going to be the same now.'

He recognized in Mary's response that she wanted to resume the old relationship she had had with Him before the cross—and the Lord was telling her that cannot be. Things had changed. The relationship would be different—it would be better. They would have fellowship and it would be richer; but first He had to ascend to the Father and then send the Holy Spirit.

He spoke of this to His disciples in the upper room discourse in chapter 16, in verse 7. The Spirit who had been *with* them would be *in* them. And through Him, the Father and Son would also live *within* the believer. Mary needed to understand that: They would resume fellowship, but on an even deeper level, through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit. And so Jesus told her to "stop clinging", 'Stop trying to hold on to the old relationship.'

It was a necessary rebuke, but as I said, one that was given gently. Her response was natural; it was a response out of affection. And it's hard to fault her for that, for she'd received much from Him; He had cast out seven demons from her. Years earlier He found a helpless, tormented person, and He gave her life back to her. She loved Him for it, loved Him for all that He had done for her, and loved Him for who He is. She thought He was gone. Now He was there, before her, and she didn't want to let Him go.

So again, who can blame her? In fact, that's what we need; we need to love Christ with the loyalty and devotion of Mary Magdalene. We need a growing, vital relationship with Him—and affection for Him. But we can only have that rightly, correctly, when it is affection, (feelings), governed by the truth—otherwise it would

become emotionalism, which can lead us astray, lead us off the path, and lead us into error.

But if we seek to *know* Him, seek to *know* Christ as earnestly as Mary sought Him, but seek Him according to truth, according to the Scriptures, then we will have the right affection. That's what truth produces; that's the sanctifying work of the Word of God.

In Luke 24, verse 32, after the two disciples who walked with Jesus on the Emmaus road realized who it was who spoke to them, they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking...while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" That's how we have a burning heart for the Lord: It is through Scripture; it is through their explanation; it's through the reading and the teaching of it. That's how the Lord speaks to us. That's how He transforms us.

And then He uses us in the lives of others. We see that here because that's what He did for Mary; she loved Him, and He blessed her by giving her the privilege of being the first witness of the resurrection—and then being sent to announce it. So He says to her, "Go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and Your Father, and My God, and Your God.' " (vs17).

As the first witness of the resurrection she was to be the first herald of 'the Good News'—and not only announce that He is alive, but also tell the disciples that He calls them His "*brothers*." It's a new designation to indicate the new relationship that has resulted from His death and resurrection. It is very personal—they are members of His family.

All believers are. In Romans chapter 8, in verse 17, Paul calls us, "fellow heirs with Christ." There's no greater privilege than that. We inherit the kingdom with Him, and rule with Him—and will for all eternity. He called them *His brothers*. And when we remember that only three days earlier they had all abandoned Him, leaving Him alone to the enemy, we see all the more clearly His grace and love to them—and us.

Psalm 103, verse 14 states, "He knows our frame, and is mindful that we are just dust." He understood their weaknesses; He understands our weakness. He knew it when we were chosen in eternity past. He's known it from all eternity—He knew it when He died for us on the cross. He understood our condition and who we are—who He was dying for. He knows us and is merciful and forgiving.

As the author of Hebrews wrote in Hebrews chapter 2, verse 11, 'He is not ashamed to call us brothers.' He never deserts us—even though we may desert Him in a moment of weakness. And He is there always to care for us when we stumble—and pick us up when we fall. That is our relationship with Him.

He made these weak, stumbling men His brothers. He established a new relationship with them, making them a part of His family with all of the family privileges in the family of God. And that is emphasized in the announcement that, 'He was ascending to His Father and their Father.' (vs17c). God is now their heavenly Father—and they could approach Him with confidence knowing that He would hear them: He would help them, care for them, guide and protect them. These are among the privileges that we all have who have put their faith in Jesus Christ. God is no longer our judge; He is our Father, as He is Christ's Father.

Now, of course, our relationship with God is not identical with His. He didn't say, 'I ascend to our Father and our God', but, "I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God." (vs17c)—Which indicated that while the relationship they had with God was close, it was still different from the relationship that Christ *had* with Him—and *has* with Him. 'Christ is the *Logos*'; that's how our Fourth Gospel begins; and God is His Father eternally.

Theologians speak of the *Son of God* as, "Eternally generated from the Father; without beginning or end; begotten, not made; very God of very God." So Christ is God's Son, naturally, eternally. But we are creatures—and so God's sons by adoption, by regeneration, and by grace. Jesus is like us in His humanity, but different, completely,

from us in His deity. And the resurrection proved that. He claimed to be equal with the Father, and His resurrection proved that He is.

Still, while the distinction is maintained, the stress is on the closeness of the relationship that we now have, that every believer in Jesus Christ now has, with God. And the Lord's first gesture to Mary that morning was an indication of how warm and personal that relationship is, when He spoke her name. And in obedience she left the Lord, and she went off to the disciples.

That must have been very difficult for her. She was holding on to Him; that is where she wanted to be. But the Lord commissioned her, as it were, sent her off to the disciples—and she went. Merrill Tenney wrote, "The mourner became the missionary—and the missionary because of her love for Him." And so out of that love she left and went to the disciples.

That's what lies behind all obedience, really, all pure obedience. It's not merely, 'A will to obey, knowing, 'This is what I *should* do, therefore I will do it...It's not something I want to do, but I *must* do it.' 'I think, bottom line, that is true—we *must* do what's right, whether we want to or not.

But pure obedience, and the kind of obedience we see here in Mary, is obedience out of love for the Savior—which makes obedience natural and makes us, with that kind of heart and attitude, a blessing to others. Those who obey the Lord are always a blessing to others. We may have to do difficult things; but in being obedient, we bless. And Mary is an example. —She gladly obeyed. As I say, I think there must have been something that made her want to stay there with Him, her love for Him, but because she did love Him, she obeyed Him. And as a result, it was a great blessing for the disciples.

And she was a blessing to the disciples. They were a defeated bunch when she came with 'the Good News' that Jesus was alive...(well...maybe John had said something)—but now there's a second witness to that. "I have seen the Lord", she told them,

(vs18), and then told them all the things, "that He had said to her". One of those being, (that I'm sure she communicated), is that they were "His brothers"; they were His family, they were His closest companions. And soon He would come to them directly and He would speak their names to them individually.

'The name', is important in the Bible. God's name is important to Him. He knows that our names are important to us. In the Bible, the *name*, generally, very often represents the person himself, or herself. It defines something about them. *Abram* is 'Exalted Father'. The name is changed to *Abraham*, 'Father of a multitude'. It defines something about the person. And that's true of the Lord. His name defines a great deal about Him.

We sometimes forget a name ... I sure do. I don't know about you, when you get to be my age, you're struggling for names every day. But He never forgets: The names are important, and names are important to Him. From the least of us to the greatest He remembers us fully and always. In fact, to the Lord, 'There are no *least* among us'. We are infinitely important to Him. He loves each and every one of His believers, regardless of how smart we are compared to one another. He loves us all equally, because He loves us all infinitely—and there cannot be any degrees within infinity. We're equally and infinitely important to Him. As our Good Shepherd, He knows each one of His sheep. He knows us by name, very personally, intimately.

And in Revelation chapter 2, verse 17, He gives an unusual promise to the one who 'overcomes', to the one who perseveres to the end. He said, "I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it."

Close friends have special names for each other; they have nick names. Husbands and wives have such names, unique ways of speaking to each other that no one else has—special terms of affection. And we will have that with our Lord. Each of us have a special, unique, personal relationship with Him—and we will have that special, unique, personal relationship with Him throughout all of eternity, that no one else will share.

Your relationship will be unique from the relationship that I will have with Him—and so forth with all of us. Well that's a great promise, and a great thing to look forward to, our deep, personal relationship with Him. —Personal, private relationship with Him.

So we're to be 'overcoming', like Mary—we are to be obedient. And God's people are; that's what characterizes us. Not perfection, but characterized by obedience and striving to know the Lord, and serve Him. We are "overcomers". And as Paul wrote in Romans chapter 8, verse 37, "We overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loves us." Now that's a statement about grace. We *overcome* through the work of Christ; but *we* overcome.

Well, the Lord loved us so much that He died for us in order to gain that relationship with us, in order to gain forgiveness and life for His people, to gain a personal relationship with Him throughout all eternity. "This is eternal life," the Lord said in John 17:3, "that they may *know* You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Do you know Him? If you don't, you are without eternal life, and you have no hope in that condition of resurrection to glory. God is not your Father. God is still your judge.

But the Lord stretches out His hands to you, and He invites you to come. And all who respond and come to Him, believe in Him, are received by Him—they are forgiven; they pass from death into life. So look to Christ if you have not done that; believe in Him as the Son of God and the only Savior of mankind.

And then, by God's grace, and by His power, live for Him. May God help us all to do that.

*(Closing prayer)* Father, as Your people we do stand; we stand firm in the faith and in loyalty and obedience to You—but not in our own strength; it's *in* Christ that we stand. It's *in* Christ that we have life. It's *in* Christ that we died and rose again—and are 'seated in the heavenlies' at this present time, as Paul puts it. (Eph 2:6).

We thank You for that great position and the great condition we have as believers in Jesus Christ; all because of what You did in Your sovereign grace from eternity past and, in time, with the sending of Your Son and His sacrifice in our place. Thank You for raising Him from the dead, and for giving us that resurrection life, as well. We thank You for all that we have *in* Him. It's all of Your grace, and we give You the praise and the thanks.

Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

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